



## Exercise 2.6

# Firewise Conversations



While Firewise recommendations may be common knowledge among resource managers, some landowners may not be inclined to implement them. Use this exercise to generate a discussion about how to communicate with reticent landowners. You may wish to link this exercise to **Exercise 4.1: What Went Wrong?** or **Exercise 4.3: Questions to Build Understanding**. **Fact Sheet 4.7: Addressing Misconceptions about Wildland-Urban Interface Issues** also provides helpful information for situations like this. This exercise may be followed and integrated with **Exercise 2.13: Juggling Multiple Objectives**, which ties Firewise concepts to other forest management and landscaping practices.

**Objectives:** Participants will be able to do the following:

1. Recognize that landowner objectives and goals may conflict with Firewise recommendations.
2. Identify strategies for discussing Firewise goals with interface homeowners.

**Materials:**

*Fact Sheet 2.3: Reducing Fire Risk*  
*Handout 1: Role Assignments* (two copies)  
Two extroverted volunteers  
Firewise material from your state  
Optional: *Worksheet 1* from *Exercise 2.13: Juggling Multiple Objectives*

**Time:** 10 minutes for role play (30 minutes more if you do *Exercise 2.13*)

1. During a break before this exercise, select and approach two outgoing participants. Make sure one has real Firewise training and experience; the other person will role-play a landowner.
2. Distribute the handout to them and go over any questions they have. Explain that they will role-play this scenario and that they are free to extrapolate and ham it up a bit!
3. Introduce this exercise to the participants by stating:

*The Firewise program has effective techniques for protecting structures from fire in the interface. The challenge that professionals face is convincing landowners to implement these techniques. Landowners may object to some Firewise ideas because they require modifying the house and landscape design, or because they do not understand the risks and possibilities. This skit is a possible interaction between a Firewise trained professional and a landowner hearing about Firewise design and defensible space for the first time. As you listen, consider how the conversation could be improved with a different appreciation of interface landowners.*

4. There is no right or wrong way for this skit to unfold, just use it to make people aware of the basic issues. After 10 minutes or so of the skit, ask all participants how they might begin conversations with landowners to improve Firewise safety through landscaping near structures.



**Note:** Your participants may have a number of examples of unsuccessful conversations with interface landowners. In some of these circumstances, misconceptions may be preventing good communication. Use **Fact Sheet 4.7: Addressing Misconceptions about Wildland-Urban Interface Issues** to help the group identify these difficulties and generate ideas for new communication patterns.

Other unsuccessful conversations may be the product of not taking into consideration the landowners' interests, motives, and concerns and not adapting the resource message appropriately. Use **Exercise 2.13: Juggling Multiple Objectives** to generate possible solutions to balancing multiple objectives.

## Summary

Natural resource professionals need to be able to communicate their messages clearly and connect them to what individual landowners care about. Although Firewise principles are common knowledge for most natural resource professionals, learning more effective methods for explaining the principles and practicing strategies for communicating with landowners insures better communication, which makes programs more effective.

## Handout 1: Role Assignments

**Instructions:** Role-play a conversation between Firewise the Resource Professional and Reluctant the Landowner. Firewise just arrived and is introducing himself or herself to Reluctant. They are standing in the landowner's driveway, near the house. It is a large house on a 10-acre, heavily forested lot. They will take a tour of the property, exchanging suggestions and concerns. Be spirited, have fun, come to some arrangement for further action. Do NOT feel restricted by the following suggestions.

**Role for Firewise the Resource Professional:** (Be professional but persistent.)

- You are trying to get a foothold in this new, affluent, politically powerful neighborhood. Reluctant the Landowner, a vocal community leader, is the first person willing to talk to you.
- You are concerned that the neighborhood road system has only one way in and out and few places for fire trucks to turn around. The houses and driveways are hidden and not numbered.
- You are concerned about the heavy fuels in the neighborhood and that there is no firebreak between the neighborhood and the adjoining state forest. In addition, many homes in the neighborhood are on the dry southern side of a large ridge.
- You are concerned about Reluctant's long, narrow, and curving driveway (along which you just arrived) because firefighting equipment may not be able to access the house.
- As you tour Reluctant's lot you also notice:
  - Wood stored near house
  - Ladder fuels
  - Very little open space
  - Trees touching the house and big shrubs under large windows
  - Wood siding
  - Open gutters filled with pine needles

How can you get Reluctant and the rest of the neighborhood to practice Firewise ideas?

**Role for Reluctant the Landowner:** (Be pleasant and open to ideas, but a bit stubborn.)

- You are a well-educated advertising professional who is very proud of your 10 acres.
- You know many of the neighbors will likely talk to you about your impressions of Firewise principles and your intentions (i.e., whether to adopt or avoid them).
- You think you are doing the right thing by protecting nature and you very much value the privacy vegetation provides.
- You specifically designed the driveway to appear rustic and private, blocking any view of the road. Your house has wood siding to blend in to the forest.
- You are especially proud of your new deck, at the back of the house, that was built around several trees (the trunks come up through the deck).
- You like burning your wood stove and store firewood near the back door for convenience.
- Your partner (wife/husband) loves nature and hates to kill ants or weeds.
- You abhor mowing grass, and are delighted that most of the groundcover near the house is leaves, mulch, and shrubs.